USA /// IN BRIEF

ELECTIONS

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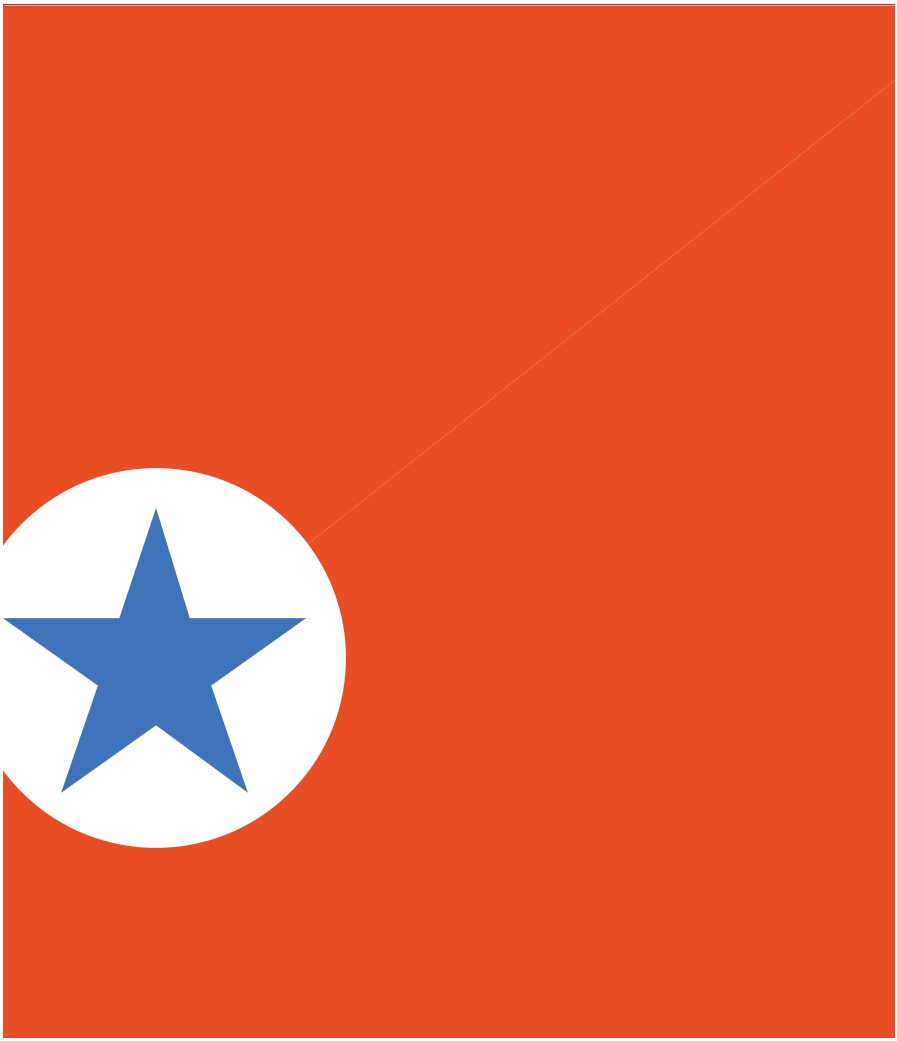

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Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of democracy.

Elections give citizens a voice in their government in the most fundamental way: by deciding who governs.

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Why do elections matter?

Elections help ensure that power passes in a peaceful, orderly manner from citizens to their elected representatives—and from one elected official to his or her successor.

The U.S. Constitution gives certain powers to the national (or "federal") government and reserves others for the individual states, and the people. In many countries, national governments set education and health policies, but in the U.S., the 50 states have primary responsibility in these areas. National defense and foreign policy are examples of federal responsibility.

The Constitution requires that each state have a republican form of government, and it forbids states from violating certain specified rights (e.g., "No State shall…deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."). But states otherwise retain considerable power.

The American system can appear complicated, but it ensures that voters have a voice at all levels of government.

• CALIFORNIANS WAIT TO VOTE AT A POLLING PLACE IN LOS ANGELES' VENICE BEACH DISTRICT, NOVEMBER 4, 2008.

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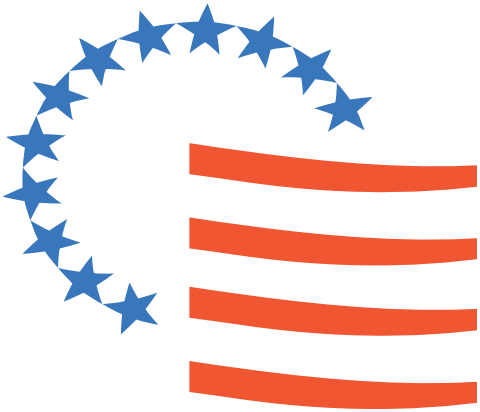
Who votes?



When George Washington was elected as the first president in 1789, only 6 percent of the U.S. population could vote. In most of the original 13 states, only landowning men over the age of 21 had the right to vote.

Today, the U.S. Constitution guarantees that all U.S. citizens over the age of 18 can vote in federal (national), state and local elections.

- THE ONLY ELECTED FEDERAL OFFICIALS ARE THE PRESIDENT, VICE PRESIDENT AND MEMBERS OF CONGRESS—THE 435 MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE 100 SENATORS.

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Which public officials are elected?

The U.S. Constitution sets the requirements for holding federal office, but each of the 50 states has its own constitution and its own rules for state offices.

For example, governors in most states serve four-year terms, but in other states the governor is elected for only two years. Voters in some states elect judges, while in others judges are appointed to office. States and localities elect thousands of public officials—from governors and state legislators to school board members and even dogcatchers.

The only elected federal officials are the president and vice president, and members of Congress—the 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the 100 senators.

Can anyone run for political office?

The U.S. Constitution establishes the requirements for holding an elected federal office.

To serve as president, one must be a natural-born* citizen of the United States, at least 35 years old, and a resident of the United States for at least 14 years. A vice president must meet the same criteria. Under the 12th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the vice president cannot have served two terms as president.

Candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives must be at least 25 years old, have been U.S. citizens for seven years, and be legal residents of the state they seek to represent in Congress. U.S. Senate candidates must be at least 30, U.S. citizens for nine years, and legal residents of the state they wish to represent.

* A NATURAL-BORN CITIZEN IS SOMEONE WHO WAS A U.S. CITIZEN AT BIRTH WITH NO NEED TO BE NATURALIZED.

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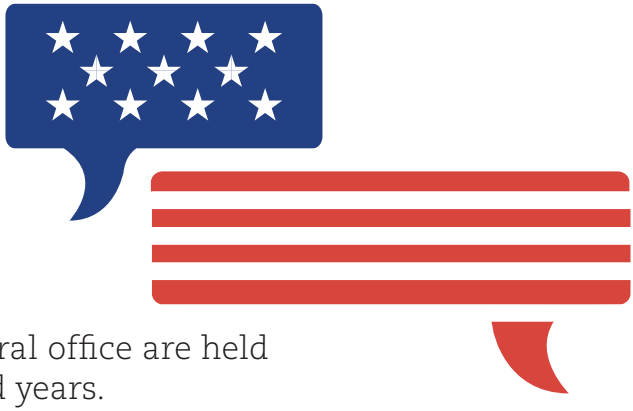
Requirements to hold federal office

A federal office holder must meet certain requirements ★

	Minimum Age	U.S. Citizenship and Residence
★ PRESIDENT	35 yrs	Natural-born* U.S. citizen; reside in the U.S. for 14 years before the election
★ VICE PRESIDENT	35 yrs	Natural-born* U.S. citizen; reside in the U.S. for 14 years before the election and must reside in a different state than the president
★ SENATOR	30 yrs	U.S. citizen for 9 years; reside in the state from which elected
★ REPRESENTATIVE	25 yrs	U.S. citizen for 7 years; reside in the state from which elected

When are elections held?



Elections for federal office are held in even-numbered years.

The presidential election is held every four years and takes place on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

Elections for all 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are held every two years.

U.S. senators serve six-year terms that are staggered so that one-third (or one-third plus one) of the 100 senate seats come up for election every two years.

If a senator dies or becomes incapacitated while in office, a special election can be held in an odd-numbered year or in the next even-numbered year. The newly elected senator serves until the end of the original senator's term. In some states, the governor appoints someone to serve the remainder of the original term.

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How many times can a person be president?

After George Washington, the first president, declined to run for a third term, many Americans believed that two terms in office were enough for any president.

None of Washington's successors sought a third term until 1940, when, at a time marked by the Great Depression and World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt sought, and won, a third presidential term. He won a fourth term in 1944 and died in office in 1945. Some people thought that was too long for one person to hold presidential power. So in 1951, the 22nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, which prohibits anyone from being elected president of the United States more than twice.

• THE WHITE HOUSE, IN WASHINGTON, D.C., HAS BEEN THE OFFICIAL OFFICE AND RESIDENCE OF THE PRESIDENT SINCE 1800.

What about other political offices?

There are no term limits for members of Congress. Term limits, if any, for state and local officials are spelled out in state constitutions and local ordinances.

The two chambers of the U.S. Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate, have nearly equal powers, but their means of election are quite different.

The Founders of the American Republic intended members of the House of Representatives to be close to the public, reflecting the public's wishes and ambitions.

Therefore, the Founders designed the House to be relatively large to accommodate many members from small legislative districts and to have frequent elections (every two years).

- THE U.S. CONGRESS CONSISTS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRE-SENTATIVES AND THE SENATE.

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Each of the 50 states is entitled to one seat in the House, with additional seats allocated according to population.

Alaska, for example, has a very small population and therefore has only one U.S. representative. California, the most populous state, has 55. Every 10 years the U.S. Census is taken, and House seats are reallocated among the states based on the new population figures.

Each state draws the boundaries of its congressional districts. States have considerable latitude in how they do this, so long as the number of citizens in each district is as close to equal as possible. Unsurprisingly, when one party controls the state government, it tries to draw the boundaries to the benefit of its own congressional candidates.

The Senate was designed for its members to represent larger constituencies—an entire state—and to provide equal representation for each state, regardless of population.

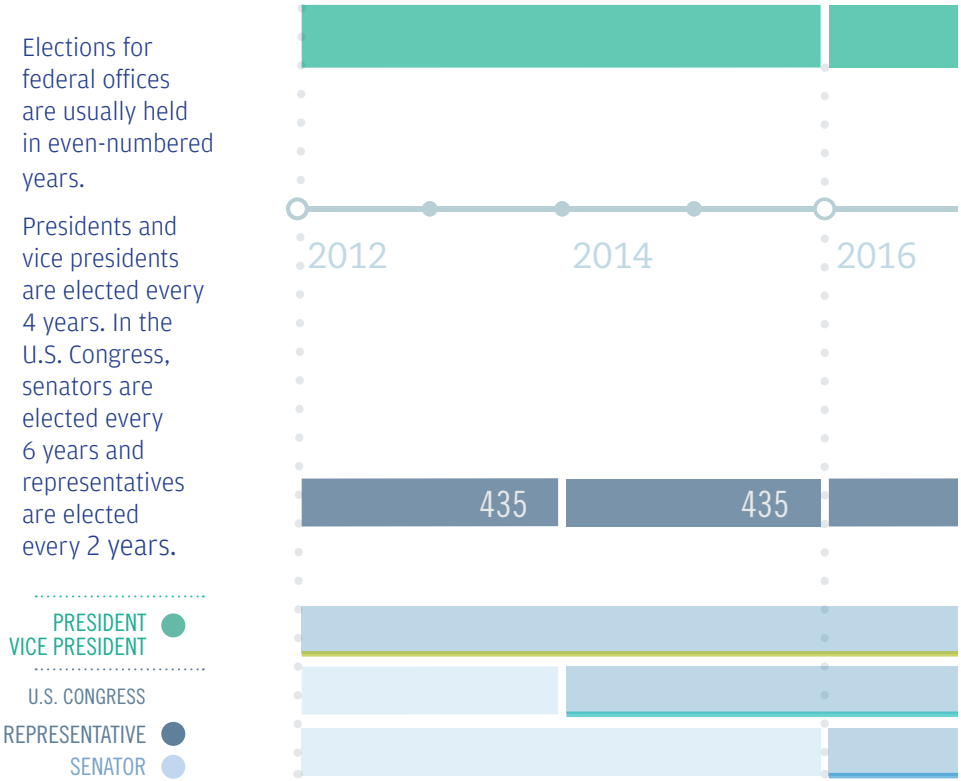
Thus, small states possess as much influence (two senators) as large states in the Senate.

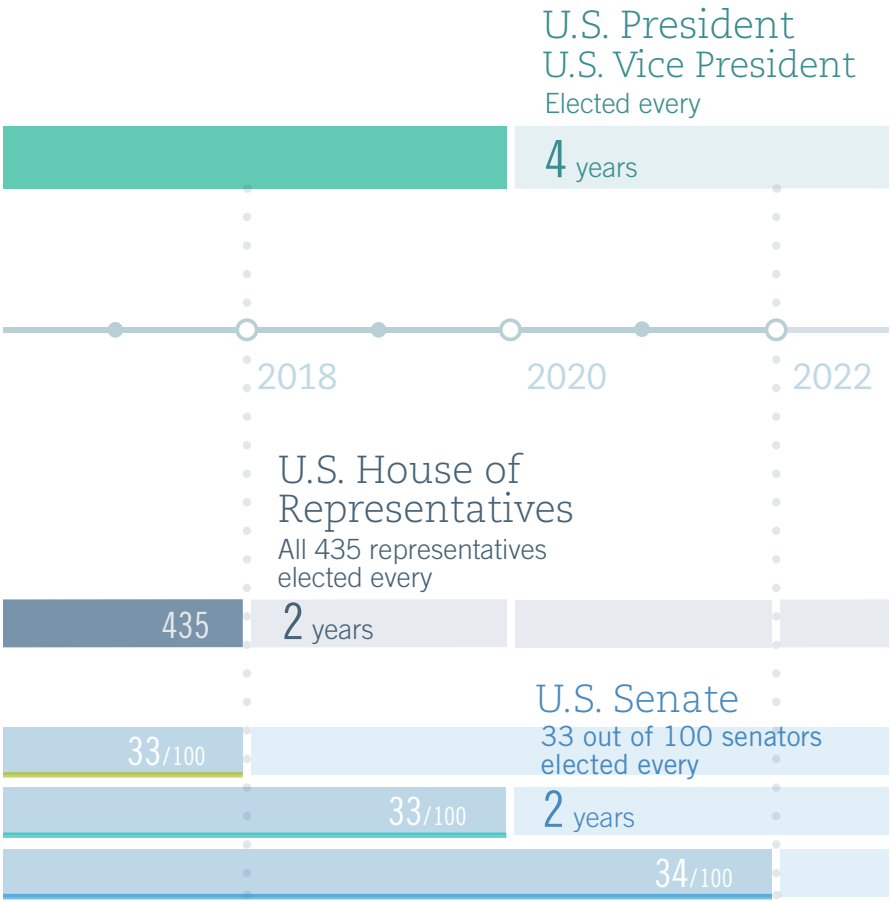
The two chambers of the U.S. Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate, have nearly equal powers, but their means of election are quite different.

Elections for federal office

Elections for federal offices are usually held in even-numbered years.

Presidents and vice presidents are elected every 4 years. In the U.S. Congress, senators are elected every 6 years and representatives are elected every 2 years.





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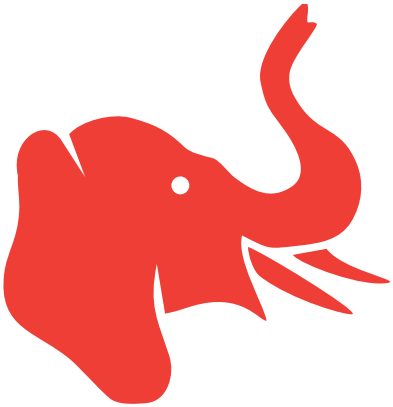
Why does the United States have only two major political parties?



The drafters of the U.S. Constitution did not envision political parties. But, as voting rights broadened and the nation expanded westward, political parties emerged. Two major parties—Democrats and Whigs—became firmly established and powerful by the 1830s.

Today, the Republican and Democratic parties dominate the political process—both of them heirs to predecessor parties from the 18th and 19th centuries.

With rare exceptions, members of the two major parties control the presidency, the Congress, the governorships and the state legislatures. Every president since 1852 has been either a Republican or a Democrat.

- THE DONKEY AND ELEPHANT HAVE BEEN THE SYMBOLS OF THE DEMOCRATS AND THE REPUBLICANS SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY.

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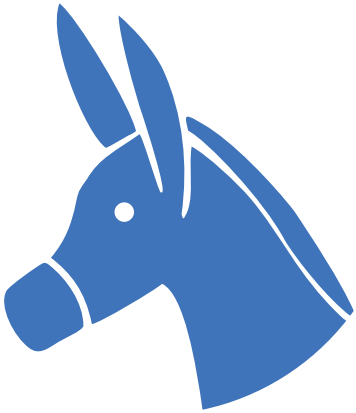

• EVERY PRESIDENT SINCE 1852 HAS BEEN EITHER A REPUBLICAN OR A DEMOCRAT.

Rarely do any of the 50 states elect a governor who is not a Democrat or a Republican. And the number of independent or third-party members of Congress or of state legislatures is extremely low.

Why aren't there more small parties? Many political experts point to America's "first past the post" elections, in which the candidate with the most votes wins, even if they receive less than a majority of the votes cast. In countries that instead award legislative seats based on the proportion of votes a given party receives, there is more incentive for small parties to form and compete. In the U.S. system, a party can win a seat only if its candidate gets the most votes. That makes it difficult for small political parties to win elections.

What about Americans who don't belong to the Democratic or Republican Party?

- SOMETIMES AMERICANS FEEL THAT NEITHER MAJOR PARTY ADVANCES THEIR PREFERRED POLICIES AND BELIEFS.

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In recent decades, increasing numbers of American voters call themselves politically "independent," or affiliated with no party.

Yet opinion polls suggest that most independents lean toward either the Republican or Democratic Party. Some do belong to smaller political parties. Regardless of party affiliation—or lack thereof—all Americans age 18 and older are allowed to vote in local, state and presidential elections.

How does the two-party system represent the beliefs of Americans who affiliate with neither party? Sometimes Americans feel that neither major party advances their preferred policies and beliefs. One strategy they may pursue is to form a new party for the purpose of demonstrating the popularity of their ideas. One famous example occurred in 1892, when dissatisfied Americans formed the Populist Party. Its platform called for a graduated income tax, direct election of senators, and an eight-hour workday. The Populists never captured the presidency, but the big parties noticed their new competitor's growing popularity. The Democrats and Republicans began to adopt many of the Populists' ideas, and in time the ideas became the law of the land.

How are presidential candidates chosen?

During the summer of a presidential election year, the Republicans and Democrats each hold a national convention where they adopt a "platform" of policies and nominate their party's candidates for president and vice president. Today, a simple majority of delegates' votes is needed to capture the nomination.

In earlier times, the conventions were exciting, with outcomes uncertain and candidates rising and falling with each ballot. Sometimes negotiations were held in "smoke-filled" hotel rooms, where cigarette- and cigar-smoking party leaders cut deals to secure their preferred candidate the required delegate votes.

Today the process is more transparent, and for about the last 60 years, each party's presidential nominee was known before its convention began.

Each state (plus the District of Columbia and several U.S. territories) is allotted a number of delegates—typically determined by the state's population but adjusted by a formula that awards bonuses for factors like whether a state voted for the party's candidate in the last presidential election. Most delegates are "pledged" to support a particular candidate, at least on the first ballot, and no convention has required more than one ballot to nominate its presidential candidate for many years.

• DEMOCRATS WAVE SIGNS FOR THEIR PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE, BARACK OBAMA, DURING THE 2008 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION.

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What's the difference between a primary and a caucus?

Primary elections and caucuses differ in how they are organized and who participates. And rates of participation differ widely.

Primaries: State governments fund and conduct primary elections much as they would any election: Voters go to a polling place, vote and leave. Voting is anonymous and quickly accomplished. Some states hold "closed" primaries in which only declared party members can participate. For example, only registered Democrats can vote in a closed Democratic primary. In an open primary, all voters can participate, regardless of their party affiliation or lack of affiliation.

Caucuses: State political parties organize caucuses, in which faithful party members speak openly on behalf of the candidates they support for the party nomination. They are communal events in which participants vote publicly. Caucuses tend to favor candidates who have dedicated and organized supporters who can use the caucus to elect convention delegates pledged to their favored presidential candidate. Caucus participants also identify and prioritize issues they want to include in the state or national party platform. Participation in a caucus requires a high level of political engagement and time. Consequently, caucuses tend to attract fewer participants than primaries.

• DURING THE NEW HAMPSHIRE PRIMARY, REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE MITT ROMNEY VISITS BEDFORD HIGH SCHOOL, JANUARY 8, 2008.

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How many states hold a primary or caucus and when are they held?

Historically, only a few states held presidential primaries or caucuses. But the trend has been toward greater voter participation in the presidential nomination process. The number of states holding primaries or caucuses started increasing in the 1970s. Today all 50 states and the District of Columbia have either presidential primaries or caucuses.

States parties choose whether they want to hold a primary or a caucus, and some states have switched from one format to the other over time.

Some states have both primaries and caucuses. For example, in Alaska and Nebraska, Republicans hold primaries while Democrats convene caucuses. In Kentucky, Democrats hold a primary and Republicans a caucus.

- THE STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE HOLDS THE FIRST PRIMARY IN JANUARY OR FEBRUARY OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEAR.

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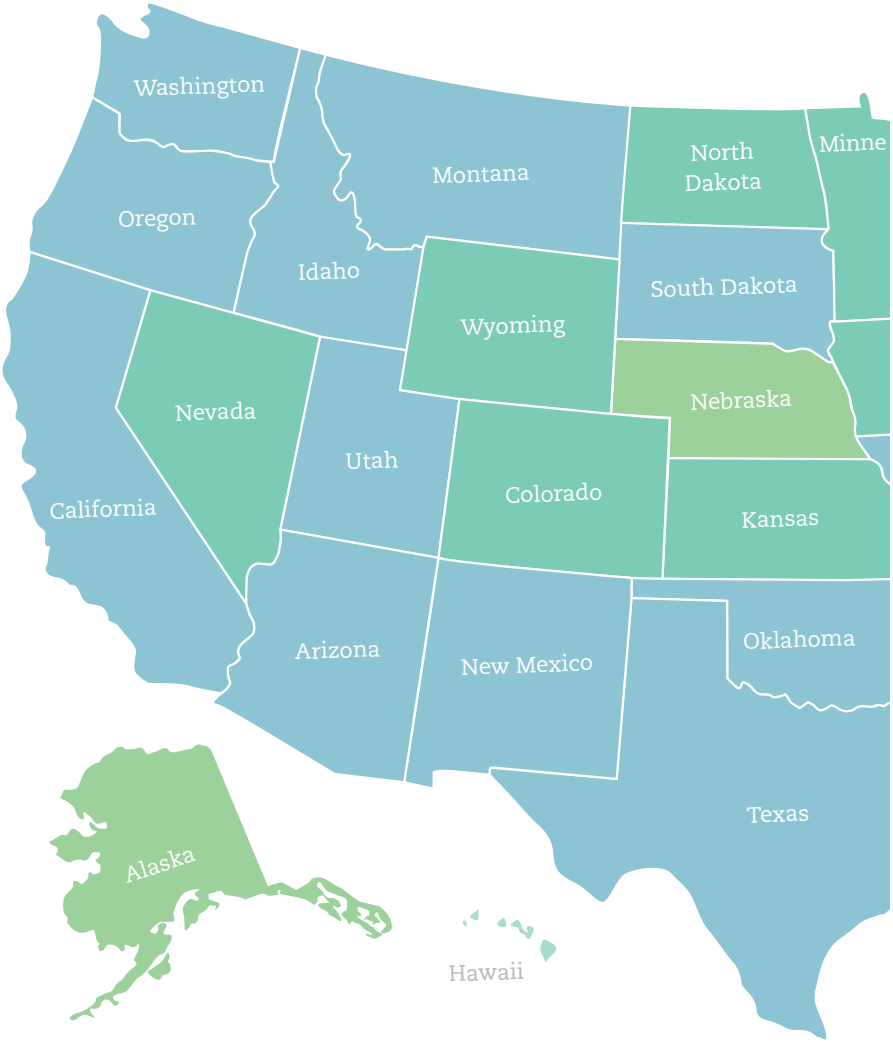
For many years, Iowa has held the first caucuses, generally in January or early February of the presidential election year, and New Hampshire the first primary, a short time later. Because these and other early contests frequently establish which candidates lack enough support to contend seriously for the presidency, candidates expend great effort in these early states, addressing their needs and interests and organizing campaigns within even smaller states, spending money on staff, media and hotels. As a result, more and more states schedule their primaries and caucuses in the winter months. Many states hold their events on the same day.

• TODAY ALL 50 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA HAVE EITHER PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES OR CAUCUSES.

The major parties frequently tweak the rules in ways they hope will produce the strongest possible candidate. For example, in 2016, the Republicans will allow states that hold their primaries after March 15 to award their delegates "winner-take-all," so that the candidate who earns the most votes—even if it's only, say, 25 percent of the votes in an eight-candidate field—will capture all that state's delegates.

A major outcome of the proliferation and acceleration of primaries and caucuses is that the nominees of the major parties are known before the national party conventions are held in late summer. This has diminished the importance of the national nominating conventions, which have become largely ceremonial events.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California
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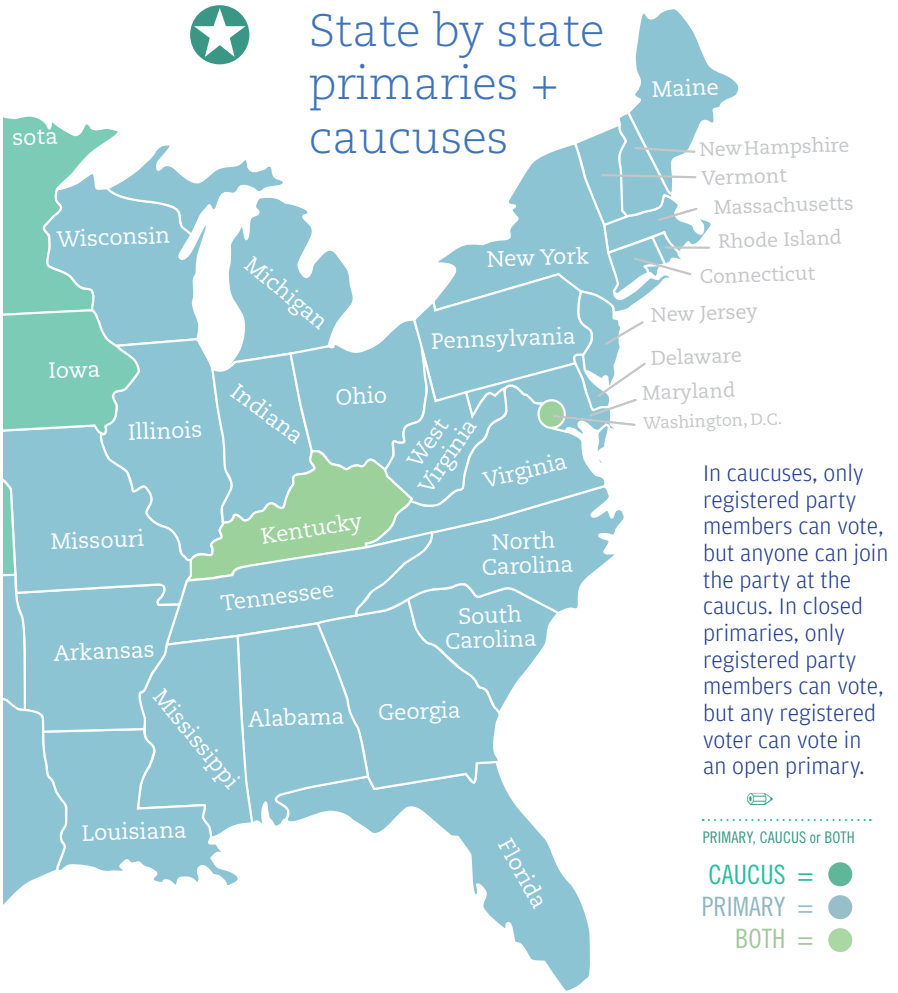
Texas
Minne
Alaska
Hawaii

State by state primaries + caucuses



In caucuses, only registered party members can vote, but anyone can join the party at the caucus. In closed primaries, only registered party members can vote, but any registered voter can vote in an open primary.

PRIMARY, CAUCUS or BOTH

CAUCUS =
PRIMARY =
BOTH =

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Why do political parties still hold national nominating conventions?

If the presidential candidates are selected through the primaries and caucuses, why do the two major political parties still hold national nominating conventions?

It's because the conventions give each party the opportunity to promote its nominees and define its differences with the opposition.

The nominating conventions are widely televised and mark the start of the national presidential campaigns.

Americans still watch the nominating conventions to hear speeches by party leaders and nominees, the choice of the nominee's vice presidential candidate (sometimes not announced until the convention), the roll call of delegate votes by the state delegations, and the ratification of the party "platform" (the document that spells out each party's positions on the issues).

• SUPPORTERS CHEER FOR MICHELLE OBAMA, WIFE OF THE 2008 DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE.

The conventions give each party the opportunity to promote its nominees and define its differences with the opposition .

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How many votes does it take to win a U.S. congressional election?

More than any other candidate. In short, the candidate who receives a plurality of the vote (that is, the greatest number of votes in the given voting district) wins the election. This is known as the "single-member" district system. In 39 states candidates for most federal and state offices can be elected with a simple plurality, but 11 states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and Vermont) have provisions for runoff elections if no candidate receives a majority of the vote.

Unlike the proportional systems in some democracies, single-member districts mean that only one party wins in any given district. This system puts smaller political parties at a disadvantage, because they find it hard to win enough districts to achieve national influence and power.

- IN HIS FIRST RUN FOR PUBLIC OFFICE, MASSACHUSETTS DEMOCRAT JOHN F. KENNEDY WAS ELECTED TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WHERE HE SERVED FROM 1947 TO 1953.

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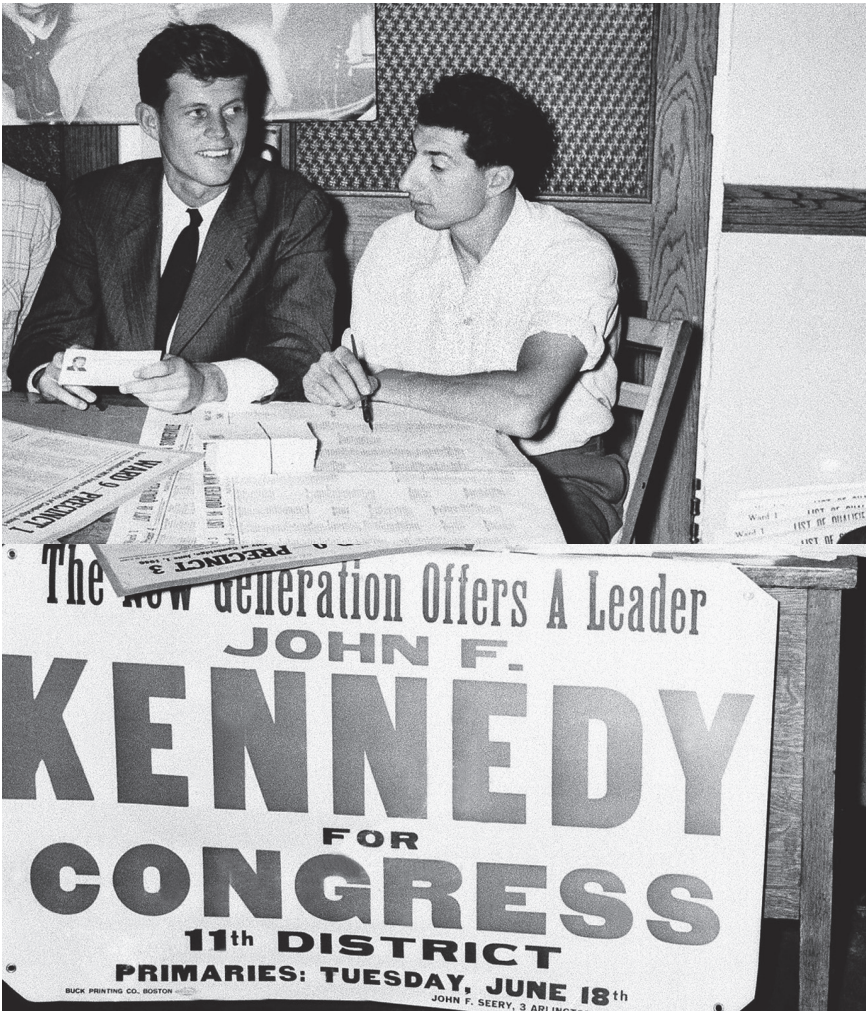
The New Generation Offers A Leader
JOHN F.
KENNEDY
FOR
CONGRESS
11th DISTRICT
PRIMARIES: TUESDAY, JUNE 18th
BUCK PRINTING CO., BOSTON

Does the presidential candidate with the most votes always win?

Not always. In fact, there have been four presidential elections in which the winner did not receive a majority of the popular vote. The first of these was John Quincy Adams in the election of 1824, and the most recent occurred in 2000 in the presidential race between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

How does this happen?

The answer lies in the "Electoral College." The drafters of the U.S. Constitution sought to create a system that balanced the interests of the (then) 13 states and those of the American people. Voters chose the members of the House of Representatives, but state legislatures (also elected by the people) elected U.S. senators. And states sent delegates to a body—the Electoral College—that chose the president and vice president.

- THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE OFFICIALLY ELECTS THE PRESIDENT, BUT THE PEOPLE CHOOSE THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE MEMBERS.

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Americans later amended the Constitution to make the system more democratic. Beginning in 1913, U.S. senators were elected directly by the people. And while the Electoral College still officially elects the president, the people choose the Electoral College members.

Here's how it works.

After the nationwide presidential election is held in November, the Electoral College meets in December. In most states, electors cast their votes based on how the majority of voters in their state voted. The electors vote in their states on December 15, and Congress officially counts the results in January.

Each state has a number of electors equal to the number of its members in the U.S. House of Representatives—determined by a census of the the state's population, plus its two senators. The District of Columbia, which is not a state and has no voting representation in Congress, has three Electoral College votes.

There are 538 electors in the Electoral College; 270 electoral votes are needed to win the presidential election.

Most states award electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis. The presidential ticket that gets the most citizens' votes receives all that state's electoral votes.

Two states—Nebraska and Maine—have experimented with awarding their electoral votes proportionately based on citizens' votes. Presidential election strategy consists of "carrying" a combination of states that adds up to 270 electoral votes. Election results can turn on the electoral votes in a handful of competitive state races.

One consequence of the winner-take-all system is that a candidate can win the most votes nationally but lose the election.

Imagine that a candidate wins a state by a small margin and that state has a lot of electoral votes. That candidate would still receive all of the electoral votes. So if a candidate wins in California by a small margin, they get all 55 of California's electoral votes. That same candidate may lose in other, smaller states by large margins and receive fewer popular votes than his or her opponent. But that candidate would still have the edge in the Electoral College.

It is important for candidates to campaign in all states, even ones with smaller populations and fewer electoral votes, in order to get a total of 270 electoral votes.

One consequence of the winner-take-all system is that a candidate can win the most votes nationally but lose the election.

- THE PRESIDENTIAL TICKET THAT GETS THE MOST CITIZENS' VOTES IN A STATE RECEIVES ALL THAT STATE'S ELECTORAL VOTES.

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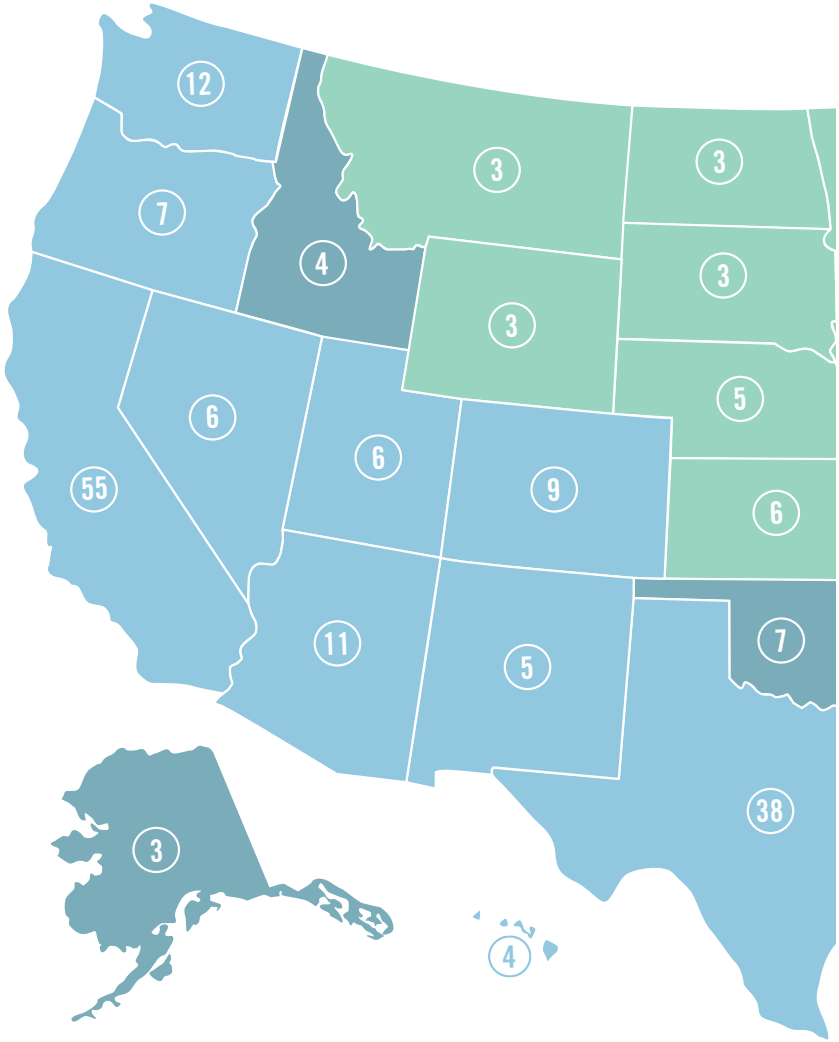
Why do Americans keep the Electoral College?

It's in the Constitution, and it is very difficult to amend the Constitution. The Electoral College system also reinforces the two-party system, which means neither of the two major parties is likely to advocate a change.

But there are other reasons for retaining the Electoral College.

Many Americans like how the Electoral College system forces presidential candidates to campaign widely—even in smaller states whose residents might not otherwise have the chance to see candidates up close. And because presidential candidates cannot garner enough electoral votes by focusing on a single state or region, they learn about and address issues of interest to voters in all parts of the country. As a consequence, the Electoral College system influences how presidential campaigns are conducted, which has important implications for the cost of running a presidential campaign.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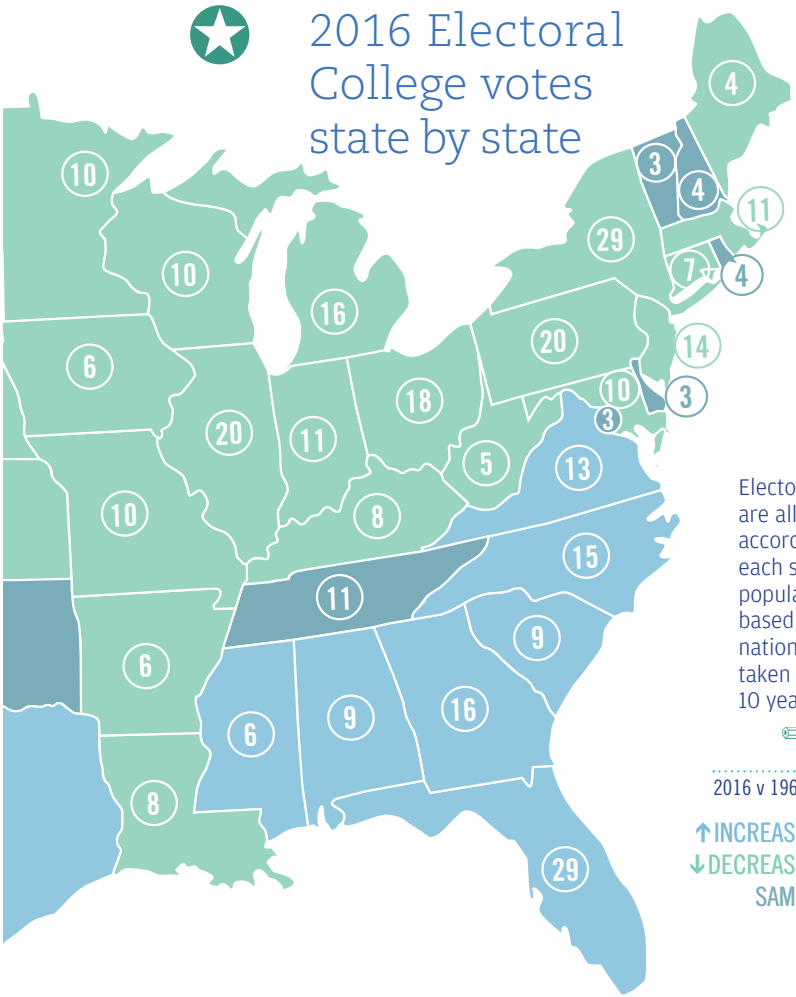
2016 Electoral College votes state by state



Electoral votes are allocated according to each state's population, based on the national census taken every 10 years.

2016 v 1960

↑INCREASE =
↓DECREASE =
SAME =

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How do presidential candidates pay for their campaigns?

Since 1976, candidates for president have been eligible to participate in a public financing system to pay for their campaigns. Until the 2000 elections, all candidates nominated for president participated in this system by accepting government funds in exchange for a promise not to spend more than a specified amount.

However, this system has become increasingly unappealing to candidates because the imposed spending limit is considered too low—and less than the amount that major candidates can often raise from private sources. Consequently, some recent presidential candidates have opted out of public funding and instead raised money to fund their campaigns.

- PARTY NOMINEES CAN USE PUBLIC FUNDS TO CAMPAIGN FOR PRESIDENT, BUT THEY CAN'T USE PUBLIC FUNDS TO CAMPAIGN FOR NOMINATIONS IN THE PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES.

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For candidates who raise their own funds, federal law dictates how and from whom candidates for president, senator and representative may seek contributions. It also limits how much any individual contributor can give. The law ensures that the press and citizens know who is contributing to a given candidate.

A candidate for president must establish a campaign organization, called a political committee, and register it with the Federal Election Commission. Once registered, political committees may seek contributions but must report all funds raised to the commission, which makes the information available to the public. Recent major-party presidential candidates have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on their campaigns. Those who raise their own funds must find thousands of contributors.

Why do U.S. presidential campaigns cost so much?

The short answer is that it is expensive to communicate to a nation of 100 million voters for the 12 or more months that make up the presidential campaign season. U.S. presidential candidates must campaign at the national level as well as in the 50 states. This means that they must hire both national and state-level staff and reach voters in person and through national and local television, radio and social media. The proliferation of presidential primaries and caucuses has resulted in longer campaigns that involve more travel and paid advertising than in the past.

• POLITICAL CANDIDATES MUST RAISE MONEY TO TRAVEL TO WHERE VOTERS LIVE.

To campaign for office, a candidate needs to hire staff; arrange for office space and travel; conduct research; issue position papers; advertise on radio and television, in publications and on the Internet; and conduct numerous public appearances and fund-raising events.

Candidates for president have the daunting task of organizing their primary campaigns state by state and then, if nominated, their general election campaign throughout the nation. A candidate for the House of Representatives will campaign in his or her specific congressional district, while a Senate candidate must cover an entire state.

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Do candidates have access to other sources of funding?

In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that political spending is a form of speech and thus protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As a result, since 2010, candidates can spend an unlimited amount of their own money to fund their campaigns.

The ruling also gave greater leeway to "political action committees" (PACs), which are formed when individuals, businesses and interest groups pool their money and donate it to support specific ideas, candidates, ballot initiatives or legislation. According to federal law, an organization becomes a PAC when it receives or spends more than $2,600 for the purpose of influencing a federal election. States have their own laws governing when an organization becomes a PAC.

Because they are independent of a candidate's official fundraising committee, PACs are not subject to the same regulations—even though they must register with the Federal Election Commission—but they are limited in how closely they can coordinate with candidates. For example, a PAC cannot contribute more than $5,000 directly to a candidate's election committee, but it can spend an unlimited amount of money to run ads that advocate or oppose a specific candidate's views.

• POLITICAL SIGNS OF CANDIDATES FOR VARIOUS OFFICES LINE A NEIGHBORHOOD STREET IN HOUSTON, TEXAS.

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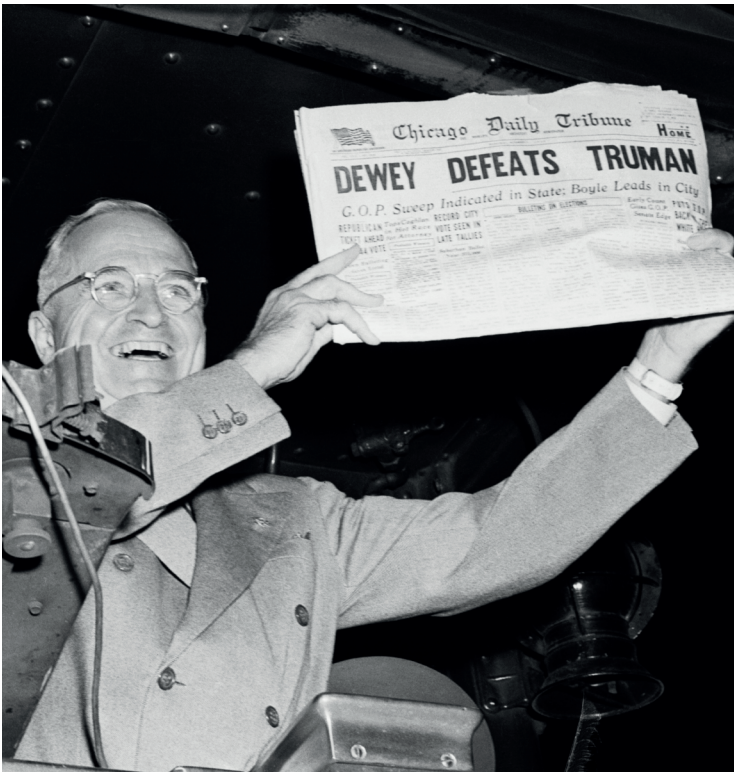
How important are polls?



- USING POLL DATA, THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE AND OTHER NEWSPAPERS PRINTED EARLY EDITIONS ANNOUNCING THAT REPUBLICAN THOMAS DEWEY HAD DEFEATED THE INCUMBENT PRESIDENT, HARRY TRUMAN, IN 1948. WHEN TRUMAN WON WITH 303 ELECTORAL VOTES, HE HELD THE ERRONEOUS HEADLINE ALOFT AND TOLD REPORTERS, "THAT AIN'T THE WAY I HEARD IT!"

Though not part of the rules and laws governing elections, public opinion polls have become an important part of the electoral process. Many political candidates hire pollsters and take frequent polls. Polling informs political candidates of how well they are being perceived in relation to their competitors and what issues are uppermost in the minds of the voters. Newspapers, television and other media also conduct opinion polls and report the results (along with the results of private polls) to give citizens a sense of how their preferences for candidates, issues and policies stand in relation to the preferences of others.

Fifty years ago, only one or two large organizations dominated public opinion polling. Today, in an era of instant news, the Internet and 24-hour cable-news channels, there are more polls, and more reporting and analysis of poll results. While some polls represent state-of-the-art practices, others are hastily conducted and employ too-small sample sizes—and may have more value as entertainment than social science. Recent years have witnessed greater skepticism about the accuracy—and objectivity—of many polls, and at least two major polling companies have stopped "horse race"-type polling around presidential elections. Still, it is unlikely that candidates, the media or the general public will abandon polling or citing favorable poll results in the foreseeable future.

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Who conducts U.S. elections?

In the United States, elections—even those for federal office—are conducted locally. Thousands of administrators–typically civil servants who are county or city officials or clerks–are responsible for organizing and conducting U.S. elections.

These administrators perform an important and complex set of tasks:

- Setting the exact dates for elections.
- Certifying the eligibility of candidates.
- Registering eligible voters and preparing lists of registered voters.
- Selecting voting equipment.
- Designing ballots.
- Organizing a large temporary workforce to administer the voting on Election Day.
- Tabulating the votes and certifying the results.

• THOUSANDS OF ADMINISTRATORS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ORGANIZING AND CONDUCTING U.S. ELECTIONS.

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Most U.S. election results are not particularly close, but occasionally there are races with a very small margin of victory or races in which the outcome is contested and votes are recounted. This happened in parts of Florida during the 2000 U.S. presidential election—the closest in U.S. history. That race forced many Americans to consider the myriad administrative tasks surrounding their elections for the first time.

The U.S. Constitution gives citizens age 18 and above the right to vote. There is no national list of eligible voters, so localities create them, by requiring citizens to register as voters. This is to prevent fraud. In the past, selective registration procedures were used to discourage some citizens—most notably, African Americans in the South—from voting. Today, the Voting Rights Act prohibits these discriminatory practices.

Each state establishes its own registration requirements. Citizens who move are required to re-register at their new place of residence. At times, states have made registration easier and at other times they have tightened the requirements. In 1993, the National Voter Registration Act made it possible for citizens to register to vote when they renew their state-issued driver's license. Some states allow voters to register on Election Day. Recently, however, some states have passed laws that require government-issued identification or eliminate registration on Election Day.

Election administrators must ensure that every eligible voter who wants to vote is on the registration list. They also must exclude from the list those who are unqualified (typically because they are too young or do not live in the jurisdiction). Generally, local election officials keep people on the lists even if they have not voted recently, rather than excluding potentially eligible voters. When someone not on the registration list appears at the polls, officials typically issue them a provisional ballot to record their votes. Only after that person's eligibilityis reviewed (this usually happens after Election Day) is the vote counted.

Election administrators also have to design the ballots for each election. They must ensure that all certified candidates are listed and all issues up for decision are correctly worded. And they must try to make the ballot as simple and as clear as possible.

There are no national standards for ballot forms, but federal law does require that administrators provide ballots in multiple languages when a percentage of the population in their jurisdiction does not speak English as a primary language.

Where voting machines have replaced paper ballots, local administrators are responsible for selecting and maintaining them. And local officials also must recruit and train a large temporary staff to work 10 to 15 hours on Election Day.

- IT TAKES THOUSANDS OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS AND OFFICIALS TO RUN U.S. ELECTIONS.

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How do Americans vote?

Since local authorities rather than a single national authority conduct elections, different localities—even in the same state—can have different types of ballots and voting technology.

Today, very few U.S. voters mark paper ballots by putting an "X" next to a candidate's name. That's because many localities use optical systems that mechanically scan paper ballots on which voters fill in circles or connect lines. Still others employ a wide variety of mechanized voting devices.

In recent years, several states have adopted procedures that make ballots available to voters before the election. This trend started with provisions for absentee ballots, issued to voters who anticipate being away from their home (and their voting place) on Election Day. Some states and local jurisdictions gradually liberalized this provision, allowing citizens to register as "permanent absentee voters" and routinely have a ballot mailed to their home. Two states—Oregon and Washington—conduct their elections entirely by mail. Absentee voters generally return their completed ballots by mail.

Some states now allow citizens to vote up to three weeks before Election Day using voting machines in shopping malls and other public places. Citizens stop by at their convenience to cast their votes.

• A UNITED STATES FLAG SERVES AS A BACKDROP AS PEOPLE VOTE AT LINDELL SCHOOL IN LONG BEACH, NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 6, 2012.

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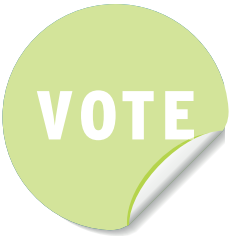
Does early voting affect election results?



No, because even when citizens vote early, their votes are not counted until the polls close on election night.

This prevents official information from being released about which candidate is ahead or behind, which could possibly influence voters who wait until Election Day to vote.

The one thing that all U.S. localities have in common is that no votes are officially tabulated and publicized until after the polls have closed.

Although U.S. television networks often conduct a joint exit poll of people who have just voted in the national elections, this practice has received critical scrutiny in recent years.

- MANY AMERICANS VOTE BY ABSENTEE BALLOT; THEIR VOTES ARE COUNTED AFTER ELECTION DAY.

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BALLOTS ONLY
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE
THIS TAG TO BE REUSED
ELECTION MAIL
TARE WEIGHT 1.07 LBS
TARE WEIGHT 1.0 LBS
LABEL OTHER END
DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL BALLOTS ONLY

What is the United States doing to keep elections fair in the future?

One of the important lessons of the extremely close 2000 presidential election was that the election administration, balloting and vote-counting challenges encountered in Florida could have occurred almost anywhere in the United States. Several studies were commissioned, and a variety of panels heard expert witnesses and took testimony about the need for reform.

In 2002, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act to address the problems of the 2000 election and anticipate new ones. First, the federal government funded state and local efforts to replace outdated punch-card and lever voting machines. Second, it established the Election Assistance Commission to afford local election technical assistance and to help local officials establish voting device standards. The commission studies voting machine and ballot design, registration and provisional voting methods, techniques for deterring fraud, procedures for recruiting and training poll workers, and voter education programs.

The Help America Vote Act marks a significant expansion of the federal government's role in a matter traditionally left to localities. But the reforms introduced have helped restore faith in the U.S. election process.

• PEOPLE IN UNIVERSITY PARK, MARYLAND, WAITED HOURS TO VOTE IN THE 2008 ELECTION.

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Every vote counts.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS

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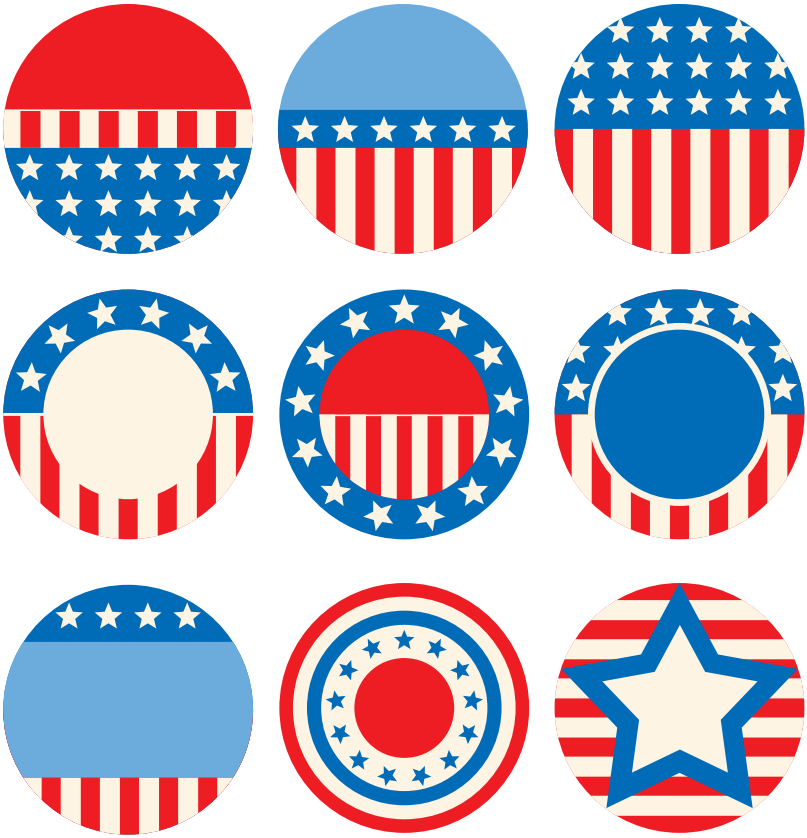
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